

PHOTOGRAPHY

FAQ

Q Why do you never mention digital zoom specifications in your reviews?

A A digital zoom takes the recorded digital image, discards the outer area, enlarges the central area and adds extra detail to make the photo appear sharp. This process works to an extent, in that the camera can sharpen up clearly defined edges and boost the contrast in fine textures. However, because the extra information it adds is pure guesswork, it's not really adding genuine detail to the photo. As such, digital zooms are best avoided, and we habitually switch off cameras' digital zooms as soon as we unpack them.

If you want to crop an image, enlarge it and apply digital sharpening, you're better off doing so in software such as Adobe Photoshop Elements, where you'll have more control over the process and can more easily assess how effective it is.

Ben Pitt

Music and photography expert

ben@computershopper.co.uk

PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ18

★★★★★

£253 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk



Panasonic is a dominant force in the ultra-zoom digital camera market, and with the launch of the Lumix DMC-FZ18 it looks set to stay that way. The headline specification is an 18x zoom, optically stabilised lens, which stretches from a wide-angle 28mm to a distant galaxy-peering 504mm focal length. Otherwise, the design closely resembles Panasonic's FZ8, which we rated highly in *What's New, Shopper* June 2007.

Performance is good, with just 1.7 seconds between shots and a 2fps continuous mode, slowing to around 1.4fps after 10 shots. Sadly, this marks a steady decline from the 6-megapixel FZ7 and 7-megapixel FZ8, presumably because the increased resolutions haven't been matched by a faster processor. The control system, carried over from the FZ8, means you can adjust key settings quickly thanks to a mini-joystick and smart onscreen cues. It's the best system we've seen without resorting to dedicated hardware controls for each function. When you enable manual focus, the central area of the preview screen is enlarged, but a bigger magnification would be even better to help fine-tune focus with more confidence.

There are plenty of other features for people who are less interested in manual settings, including the DMC-FZ18's face-detection feature. This proved extremely effective both in its ability to identify faces at jaunty angles, including profiles, and in its talent for pleasing exposures when confronted with a dark or bright background. There's a strong selection of scene presets, plus an Intelligent Auto mode that automatically switches to



macro, night scenery, portrait or various other scene presets. It also employs Panasonic's Intelligent ISO feature, which adjusts the camera's sensitivity based not just on the available light but also movement of the subject. You can't set the maximum ISO speed available to this mode, as you can with other recent Panasonic cameras, but the chosen maximum of 800 is wise. In program, priority and manual exposure modes, ISO speeds from 100 to 1600 are available, but the Auto ISO option limits it to 200, which seems a little conservative to us.

Image quality is among the best we've seen from a non-SLR camera. Photos were super-sharp and captured incredible detail in skin textures and dense foliage. Panasonic's flair for flattering, lifelike colours was clearly evident, with superb handling of highlights

in high-contrast scenes. ISO 400 gave smooth, detailed results, and although noise reduction removed some detail at ISO 800, the effect was subtler than with previous Panasonic cameras.

With its 18x zoom and 8-megapixel sensor, the DMC-FZ18 is in direct competition with Fujifilm's S8000fd and Olympus's SP-560 UZ. We'll be reviewing these next month, but the FZ18 certainly sets a high standard.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Massive zoom range; great image quality
- ✓ Fast, intuitive controls
- ✗ Performance a step down from the FZ8

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 18x optical zoom (28-504mm), SDHC slot (27MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE DMC-FZ18EB-K
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)

Battery life 393 shots
-50% Reference +50% +100%

Also consider...

PENTAX Optio A30

★★★★★

£133 inc VAT

From www.ebuyer.co.uk



The Optio A30 has a 10-megapixel sensor and an optically stabilised 3x zoom lens. It's possible to set the maximum ISO speed in the Auto ISO mode, and this helps to reduce noise. This camera is quick to focus and images have warm, vibrant colours. Portraits have natural skin tones and highlights are not clipped.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 3x optical zoom (38-114mm), SDHC slot (22MB internal), 710mAh li-ion battery
PART CODE 19215
DETAILS www.pentax.co.uk
✓ Excellent image quality
FULL REVIEW Dec 2007

Battery life 283 shots
-50% Reference +50% +100%

CANON EOS 400D

★★★★★

£499 inc VAT

From www.johnlewis.com



The successor to the hugely popular EOS 350D, Canon's EOS 400D is the best affordable digital SLR camera on the market. Incredibly fast focusing, a high capture rate and brilliant image quality from the 10.1-megapixel sensor all make it really hard not to love this camera. For photography enthusiasts who want to upgrade from a film SLR or compact camera, this is undoubtedly the model to get.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 3x optical zoom (18-55mm), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 1237 B009AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
✓ Fantastic image quality
✓ Finite continuous mode
FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life 505 shots
-50% Reference +50% +100%

CANON EOS 40D with 17-85mm IS lens

★★★★★

£930 inc VAT

From www.onestop-digital.com

The EOS 40D succeeds the 30D as Canon's digital SLR for the discerning photography enthusiast. £930 may be a lot to spend on a camera, but don't be misled by the unexceptional 10.1-megapixel resolution; there's plenty here to persuade you to part with your cash.

We tested it with the 17-85mm kit lens, but it's also available without a lens for £735. This kit lens isn't cheap, then, but it's worth the extra money. It has a 5x zoom range and optical image stabilisation, which proved effective at capturing blur-free shots at slow shutter speeds. The only downside is that, unlike CCD-based stabilisation used by other manufacturers, this one disappears if you switch to another lens.

At 740g, the EOS 40D is around 50 per cent bulkier and heavier than an entry-level digital SLR, and its magnesium alloy body certainly inspires confidence. We can't fault the layout and number of physical controls, which make light work of adjusting photographic settings. There's plenty of visual feedback, too, with a backlit passive LCD screen on top of the camera, a big optical viewfinder and a 3in 230,000-pixel LCD screen. The latter is great for reviewing shots and can also be switched to display a live preview, a rare trick for a digital SLR.

The through-the-lens (TTL) optical viewfinder is usually preferable to the low-resolution digital preview, but live view is welcome when shooting at awkward angles, for previewing white balance presets and for fine-tuning manual focus, too. Dedicated zoom buttons enable quick digital zooming of the live view image to 5x or 10x, which we found made manual focus even easier than with the optical viewfinder. Live view takes its toll on battery life, giving a disappointing 231 shots in our test, but shooting using the optical viewfinder and just the passive LCD screen led to 1,611 shots.

The most significant difference between the 40D and the 400D (see 'Also consider...' below) is performance. Continuous shooting is at 6.5fps for a maximum of 75 shots (or 17 shots in Raw mode). If you don't want to use up all your shots in 12 seconds flat, a less frenetic 2.4fps mode is also available. Autofocusing is fast, even in low

light, with nine points measuring focus in both horizontal and vertical axes.

Because this is one of the most expensive cameras ever to grace the pages of *Shopper*, we expected great things from its images, and we weren't disappointed. Colours displayed a subtlety and accuracy that made other cameras seem clumsy and synthetic. Pictures weren't particularly sharp

on standard settings, but it was easy to adjust the

sharpness and various other settings using the custom Picture Style presets. However, we found it necessary to keep a close eye on the autofocus to avoid the occasional focusing error. Noise was the lowest we've seen from a digital camera, being largely insignificant at ISO 1600.

The EOS 40D is a serious investment, costing significantly more than other manufacturers' second-from-entry-level digital SLRs. Pentax's K10D (reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* November 2007) costs around £500 with a basic kit lens, while Nikon's D80 is available with an 18-135mm lens for £679. However, a D80 with a stabilised 24-120mm lens costs around £940, which makes the 40D and its kit lens seem more competitive. The 40D's 3in live-view screen and 6.5fps continuous mode positions it closer to Nikon's recently announced D300, which costs around £1,200 without a lens.

Without a direct competitor, the EOS 40D must be assessed on its own terms. Image quality is the best we've seen, although improvements over the 400D are ultimately subtle. However, for build quality, accessible controls and advanced options, the differences are more significant. For us, the excellent live preview implementation is the highlight and would be enough to convince us to splash out on the 40D over Nikon's D80.

Ben Pitt



SUMMARY

- ✓ Superb all-rounder
- ✓ Three-inch live preview screen
- ✗ Occasional autofocus errors in our tests

DIGITAL SLR CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 5x optical zoom (27-136mm (35mm equivalent), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 19018026AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ50

★★★★★

£295 inc VAT

From www.expansys.com

Panasonic's Lumix DMC-FZ50 gives almost digital SLR performance on a lower budget. The huge 12x optical stabilised zoom lens and 10-megapixel CCD let you get close to the action. Image quality is excellent at low ISO settings, but ISO 400 or higher produces grainy images. It's the best super-zoom digital camera around.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 12x optical zoom (35-420mm), SD slot (32MB card supplied), li-ion battery
PART CODE PANLUMFZ50
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

- ✓ Fantastic handling; beautiful pictures in well-lit conditions
- ✗ Image quality slumps as ISO setting rises

FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



FUJIFILM FinePix F20

★★★★★

£108 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Despite its cheap price, Fujifilm's FinePix F20 camera has a metal body and a lithium-ion battery. The F20's 2½in screen is also above average for a budget camera.

The FinePix F20 offers superb image quality and produced pleasing colours and sharp detail. It is an excellent camera at an excellent price.



COMPACT DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom, 10MB internal memory, xD slot, 3.6V 1,150mAh li-ion battery
PART CODE N077830A
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

- ✓ Superb image quality; smart design
- ✗ Uses only xD media

FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



CANON PowerShot A570 IS

★★★★★

£133 inc VAT

From www.buyacamera.co.uk

The A570 has a 4x optically stabilised zoom lens, which makes it great for counteracting camera shake, especially in low light. It also has face detection and full photographic control including aperture- and shutter-priority modes. Image quality is as good as we'd expect given the specifications and price.



DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 4x optical zoom (35-140mm), SDHC slot (16MB card supplied), 2x AA batteries
PART CODE 1773B008AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

- ✓ Optically stabilised lens

FULL REVIEW Nov 2007



FUJIFILM FinePix F50fd

★★

£180 inc VAT
From www.dabs.com

Fujifilm's F-series of compact cameras has been leading the way for quality and value for the past 18 months. Sadly, the F50fd fails to live up to this legacy. It's an attractive camera with some impressive features, but the 12-megapixel sensor brings more problems than advantages.

Some improvements over the F40fd (see *Labs*, *Shopper* December 2007) are welcome. The LCD screen is bigger at 2.7in, although this and the lower-capacity battery add up to a disappointing number of shots between charges. Aperture- and shutter-priority exposure modes are included, although manual and focus exposure remain absent. The updated face-detection system now recognises faces in profile as well as head on. The most exciting addition is optical image stabilisation, although its ability to keep shots blur-free at slow shutter speeds wasn't as reliable as other cameras' systems in our tests.

The F50fd's huge resolution slows things down to a pace that's unacceptable at this price. There was a three-second gap between shots in normal shooting, and the full-resolution



continuous mode ran at a hopeless 0.35fps. It's particularly frustrating that camera settings can't be adjusted while photos are being saved to memory card. Picture browsing is lethargic, too, but we like the new Micro Thumbnail feature, which displays 100 photos in a 10x10 grid on the screen for quick browsing.

Colour accuracy is up to Fujifilm's usual high standards, but the detail promised by the huge resolution was lost to image noise and the camera's attempts to conceal it with digital processing. Even in bright sunlight and at low ISO speeds, noise was visible in dark parts of photos, and in our tests fine detail was lower than from Panasonic's 12-megapixel FX100 (see *What's New*, *Shopper* November 2007) and often even the 8-megapixel FZ18 (reviewed on page 42). The F50fd's tendency to jump to unnecessarily high ISO settings didn't help. Given the disappointing resolution and detail, you're better off buying the FinePix F20 (see 'Also consider...' on page 43).

Ben Pitt

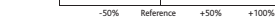
SUMMARY

- ✓ Smart design and friendly controls
- ✗ Noise a serious problem
- ✗ Pedestrian performance

DIGITAL CAMERA 12 megapixels (4,000x3,000), 3x optical zoom (36-108mm), xD and SD slots (25MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE NC00060A
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)

Battery life **208 shots**



BENQ C1050

★★

£100 inc VAT
From www.play.com

The C1050's 10-megapixel sensor is impressive for such an affordable camera. Otherwise, its design is unremarkable, with a plain plastic case and two AA batteries for power. Priority and manual exposure modes are an unexpected treat, and aperture and shutter speed settings are easily accessible. However, other modes are less successful, with a Shake Free option that simply activates the flash and which took a hopelessly underexposed shot after we chose to switch the flash off again.

Performance is the weakest area. It took four seconds to switch on and capture a photo and around five seconds between shots – the worst we've seen for over a year, except for BenQ's T700. The autofocus took a second to find its subject and often failed on the first or second attempt. In low light, it didn't try to focus. Pressing the shutter button without half-pressing it first and waiting for the autofocus gave an out-of-focus shot.

This is a shame because the C1050 is capable of



impressive image quality. Detail was on a par with the Pentax Optio A30 (see 'Also consider...' on page 42), although the unreliable focus spoiled many test shots. Noise levels were acceptable at ISO 800, giving excellent indoor photos for a camera at this price. Colour accuracy was more variable, though. Skin tones were excellent in natural light and under the flash, but less reliable in artificial light on automatic settings. High-contrast scenes revealed a limited dynamic range, with clipped or over-saturated highlights manifesting as blocks of white or garish yellow.

Clearly, judging a camera purely by its megapixel rating and price is a mistake. Fujifilm's 6-megapixel FinePix F20 (see 'Also consider...' on page 43) is far superior.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Impressively detailed, clean images
- ✗ Unreliable autofocus
- ✗ Appalling performance

DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 3x optical zoom, SD slot (24MB internal), 2x AA batteries
PART CODE 9H.07U67.80E
DETAILS www.benq.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)

Battery life **482 shots**



CHOOSING A... Digital SLR Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

RESOLUTION: 6 megapixels
SUPPLIED LENS: 18-55mm, f/3.5-f/5.6
MONITORING: 2½in, 215,000-pixel LCD screen
CONTINUOUS SHOOTING: 2½fps
SUPPLIED MEMORY: None
Recommended minimum in grey

1 A digital SLR camera with the specifications shown above will cost around £400 and suit photography enthusiasts on a budget. Despite being an entry-level digital SLR, image quality will be in a different league to all but the best fixed-lens cameras, particularly when it comes to smooth, sharp detail with minimal image noise.

2 Spend more and you'll get a camera with a higher resolution. Ten megapixels is common even for some entry-level models. This gives finer detail, although the difference isn't as great as the figures might suggest.

3 The kit lenses supplied with budget digital SLRs can take excellent pictures, but their zoom ranges and macro-focus capabilities are limited. If you're interested in telephoto photography, consider buying a second lens, perhaps with a 70-200mm focal length. Alternatively, buy a body-only camera and an 18-200mm or similar lens. Aperture values tell you how much light the lens can capture at either end of its zoom range; the lower the f-number, the brighter the lens.

4 A 2½in, 200,000-pixel screen is standard among digital SLRs, but you'll be using the optical viewfinder to compose shots. Its through-the-lens (TTL) view shows exactly what is captured by the camera's sensor and makes manual focusing easy. A second, passive LCD screen is useful for displaying camera settings.

5 Most affordable SLRs outperform even the fastest compact cameras. However, look out for a fast continuous mode, autofocus and shutter lag if quick-fire photography is a priority.

6 Digital SLRs usually don't come with any storage, so budget around £30 for a fast (at least 60x) 1GB CompactFlash or SD card to ensure that it doesn't create a performance bottleneck.